





REMARKS
OF
MR. HAMLIN, OF MAINE,
ON
RESIGNING HIS POSITION AS CHAIRMAN OF
THE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE,
AND
THE TESTS OF THE CINCINNATI CONVENTION.

In the Senate of the United States, June 12, 1856.

The Senate having come to order—

Mr. HAMLIN said: Mr. President, I rise for a purpose purely personal, such as I have never before risen for in the Senate. I desire to explain some matters personal to myself and to my own future course in public life.

Several SENATORS. Go on.

Mr. HAMLIN. I ask the Senate to excuse me from further service as chairman of the Committee on Commerce. I do so, because I feel that my relations hereafter will be of such a character as to render it proper that I should no longer hold that position. I owe this act to the dominant majority in the Senate. When I cease to harmonize with the majority, or tests are applied by that party with which I have acted to which I cannot submit, I feel that I ought no longer to hold that responsible position. I propose to state briefly the reasons which have brought me to that conclusion.

During nine years of service in the Senate, I have preferred rather to be a working than a talking member, and so I have been almost a silent one. On the

subjects which have so much agitated the country, Senators know that I have rarely uttered a word. I love my country more than I love my party. I love my country above my love for any interest that can too deeply agitate or disturb its harmony. I saw, in all the exciting scenes and debates through which we have passed, no particular good that would result from my active intermingling in them. My heart has often been full, and the impulses of that heart have often been felt upon my lips, but I have repressed them there.

Sir, I hold that the repeal of the Missouri compromise was a gross moral and political wrong, unequalled in the annals of the legislation of this country, and hardly equalled in the annals of any other free country. Still, sir, with a desire to promote harmony and concord and brotherly feeling, I was a quiet man under all the exciting debates which led to that fatal result. I believed it wrong then; I can see that wrong lying broadcast all around us now. As a wrong I opposed that measure—not indeed by my voice, but with consistent and steady and uniform votes. I so resisted it in obedience to the dictates of my own judgment. I did it also cheerfully, in compliance with the instructions of the Legislature of Maine, which were passed by a vote almost unanimous. In the House of Representatives of Maine, consisting of one hundred and fifty-one members, only six, I think, dissented; and in the Senate, consisting of thirty-one members, only one member non-concurred.

But the Missouri restriction was abrogated. The portentous evils that were predicted have followed, and are yet following, along in its train. It was done, sir, in violation of the pledges of that party with which I have always acted, and with which I have always voted. It was done in violation of solemn pledges of the President of the United States, made in his inaugural address. Still, sir, I was disposed to suffer the wrong, until I should see that no evil re-

sults were flowing from it. We were told by almost every Senator who addressed us upon that occasion, that no evil results would follow; that no practical difference in the settlement of the country, and the character of the future State, would take place, whether the act were done or not. I have waited calmly and patiently to see the fulfilment of that prediction; and I am grieved, sir, to say now, that they have at least been mistaken in their predictions and promises. They all have signally failed.

That Senators might have voted for that measure under the belief then expressed, and the predictions to which I have alluded, I can well understand; but how Senators can now defend that measure amid all its evils, which are overwhelming the land, if not threatening it with a conflagration, is what I do not comprehend. The whole of the disturbed state of the country has its rise in, and is attributable to, that act alone—nothing else. It lies at the foundation of all our misfortunes and commotions. There would have been no incursions by Missouri borderers into Kansas, either to establish slavery or control elections. There would have been no necessity either for others to have gone there partially to aid in preserving the country in its then condition. All would have been peace there. Had it not been done, that repose and quiet which pervaded the public mind then, would hold it in tranquillity to-day. Instead of startling events, we should have quiet and peace within our borders, and that fraternal feeling which ought to animate the citizens of every part of the Union toward those of all other sections.

Sir, the events that are taking place around us are indeed startling. They challenge the public mind, and appeal to the public judgment; they thrill the public nerve as electricity imparts a tremulous motion to the telegraphic wire. It is a period when all good men should unite in applying the proper remedy to secure peace and harmony to the country. Is this

to be done by any of us, by remaining associated with those who have been instrumental in producing these results, and who now justify them? I do not see my duty lying in that direction.

I have, while temporarily acquiescing, stated here and at home, everywhere, uniformly, that when the tests of those measures were applied to me as one of party fidelity, I would sunder them as flax is sundered at the touch of fire. I do it now.

The occasion involves a question of moral duty; and self-respect allows me no other line of duty but to follow the dictates of my own judgment and the impulses of my own heart. A just man may cheerfully submit to many enforced humiliations; but a self-degraded man has ceased to be worthy to be deemed a man at all.

Sir, what has the recent Democratic Convention at Cincinnati done? It has endorsed the measure I have condemned, and has sanctioned its destructive and ruinous effects. It has done more—vastly more. That principle or policy of territorial sovereignty which once had, and which I suppose now has, its advocates within these walls, is stricken down; and there is an absolute denial of it in the resolution of the Convention—if I can draw right conclusions—a denial equally to Congress, and even to the people of the Territories, of the right to settle the question of slavery therein. On the contrary, the Convention has actually incorporated into the platform of the Democratic party that doctrine which, only a few years ago, met nothing but ridicule and contempt, here and elsewhere—namely: that the flag of the Federal Union, under the Constitution of the United States, carries slavery wherever it floats. If this baleful principle be true, then that national ode which inspires us always as on a battle-field, should be rewritten by Drake, and should read thus:

“Forever float that standard sheet;
Where breathes the foe but falls before us,
With SLAVERY’S soil beneath our feet,
And SLAVERY’S banner streaming o’er us.”

Now, sir, what is the precise condition in which this matter is left by the Cincinnati Convention? I do not design to trespass many moments on the Senate; but allow me to read and offer a very few comments upon some portions of the Democratic platform. The first resolution that treats upon the subject is in these words—I read just so much of it as is applicable to my present remarks:

“That Congress has no power under the Constitution to interfere with or control the domestic institutions of the several States; and that all such States are the sole and proper judges of everything appertaining to their own affairs not prohibited by the Constitution.”

I take it that this language, thus far, is language which meets a willing and ready response from every Senator here—certainly it does from me. But in the following resolution I find these words:

“*Resolved*, That the foregoing proposition covers, and was intended to embrace, the whole subject of ‘slavery agitation in Congress.’”

The first resolution which I read was adopted years ago in Democratic Conventions. The second resolution which I read was adopted in subsequent years, when a different state of things had arisen, and it became necessary to apply an abstract proposition relating to the States to the Territories. Hence the adoption of the language contained in the second resolution which I have read.

Now, sir, I deny the position thus assumed by the Cincinnati Convention. In the language of the Senator from Kentucky, [Mr. CRITTENDEN,] so ably and so appropriately used, on Tuesday last, I hold that the entire and unqualified sovereignty of the Territories is in Congress. That is my judgment; but

this resolution brings the Territories precisely within the same limitations which are applied to the States in the resolution which I first read. The two taken together deny to Congress any power of legislation in the Territories.

Follow on, and let us see what remains. Adopted as a part of the present platform, and as necessary to a new state of things, and to meet an emergency now existing, the Convention says :

“The American Democracy recognise and adopt
 ‘ the principles contained in the organic laws estab-
 ‘ lishing the Territories of Kansas and Nebraska, as
 ‘ embodying the only sound and safe solution of the
 ‘ slavery question, upon which the great national idea
 ‘ of the people of this whole country can repose, in
 ‘ its determined conservatism of the Union—non-in-
 ‘ terference by Congress with slavery in States and
 ‘ Territories.”

Then follows the last resolution.

“ *Resolved*, That we recognise the right of the peo-
 ‘ ple of all the Territories, including Kansas and Ne-
 ‘ braska, acting through the fairly-expressed will of
 ‘ the majority of actual residents, and whenever the
 ‘ number of their inhabitants justifies it, to form a
 ‘ Constitution, with or without domestic slavery, and
 ‘ be admitted into the Union upon terms of perfect
 ‘ equality with the other States.”

Take all these resolutions together, and the deduction which we must necessarily draw from them is a denial to Congress of any power whatever to legislate upon the subject of slavery. The last resolution denies to the people of the Territory any power over the subject, save when they shall have a sufficient number to form a Constitution and become a State, and also denies that Congress has any power over the subject; and so the resolutions hold that this power is at least in abeyance while the Territory is in a territorial condition. That is the only conclusion which you can draw from these resolutions.

Alas! for short-lived territorial sovereignty. It came to its death in the house of its friends; it was buried by the same hands which had given it baptism!

But, sir, I did not rise for the purpose of discussing these resolutions, but only to read them, and state the action which I propose to take in view of them. I may—I probably shall—take some subsequent occasion, when I shall endeavor to present to the Senate and the country a fair account of what is the true issue presented to the people for their consideration and decision.

My object now is to show only that the Cincinnati Convention has endorsed and approved of the repeal of the Missouri compromise, from which so many evils have already flowed—from which, I fear, more and worse evils must yet be anticipated. It would, of course, be expected that the Presidential nominee of that Convention would accept, cordially and cheerfully, the platform prepared for him by his party friends. No person can object to that. There is no equivocation on his part about the matter. I beg leave to read a short extract from a speech of that gentleman, made at his own home, within the last few days. In reply to the Keystone Club, which paid him a visit there, Mr. Buchanan said:

“Gentlemen, two weeks since I should have made ‘you a longer speech, but now I have been placed ‘on a platform of which I most heartily approve, and ‘that can speak for me. Being the representative ‘of the great Democratic party, and not simply ‘James Buchanan, I must square my conduct according to the platform of the party, and insert no ‘new plank, nor take one from it.”

These events leave to me only one unpleasant duty, which is to declare here that I can maintain political associations with no party that insists upon such doctrines; that I can support no man for President who avows and recognises them; and that the little of

that power with which God has endowed me shall be employed to battle manfully, firmly, and consistently, for his defeat, demanded as it is by the highest interests of the country which owns all my allegiance.

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